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Children and youth need more

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Children and youth need more

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Table of Contents

A Word from the Advocate	5
A Time of Change	7
The Work of the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate	11
Provincial Government Service Plans and Budgets	25
Saying Goodbye	37

A Word from the Advocate's Office

The Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate has heard from or about over 14,000 children and youth requesting advocacy services.

We have based our advocacy services on four fundamental values - rights, information, voice and inclusion - framed within a climate of mutual respect. We believe that young people have the right to be safe from all kinds of abuse, to be taken care of, and to participate in decisions that are made about them. They need to be fully informed about what is happening to them in ways that are clear and easily understood. Young people are their own best advocates. Their voice and opinions, and the inclusion of those who care about them, contribute to a positive decision-making process.

This year's report, *Rethink the Reductions, Children and Youth Need More*, covers the year 2001 as well as the first three months of 2002. This time period has seen a considerable change in services to children and youth with many more changes to come. During this time Joyce Preston was the Advocate until her retirement on May 18, 2001, following which Laverne MacFadden was appointed Acting Advocate for one year.

Throughout the past fifteen months, the work of the Advocate's Office has continued to focus on three core functions - individual advocacy services, local advocacy development and systemic advocacy. A summary of our work in these areas is provided in this report. We also comment on the provincial government service plans and budget reductions, and how these changes affect the children, youth and families who require essential social services. Some of the changes we are deeply concerned about include the Ministry of Children and Family Development budget and staff reductions, the proposed reduction in income assistance to families and the reduction of services to older youth. We have based our comments on what we have learned from children and youth over the last seven years. A final chapter describes the fundamental values that have guided the work of the Advocate's Office since its inception.

Serving the children and youth of British Columbia through the work of the Advocate's Office has been an enormous privilege and a humbling responsibility. We honour and thank those of you who have shared some of your most private thoughts and feelings with us. We have learned from you, grown with you, and respect you for your openness, honesty and bravery.

Laverne MacFadden

Acting Advocate (May 19, 2001 - May 18, 2002)

A Time of Change

During 2001 and the first quarter of 2002, the work of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate has occurred in a context of significant internal and external change. Within this environment, the Advocate's Office continued to work on our three core functions - individual advocacy services, local advocacy development and systemic advocacy.

Retirement of the former Child, Youth and Family Advocate

The year began with the announcement of the pending retirement of Joyce Preston, the first Child, Youth and Family Advocate of BC. Ms. Preston had been appointed for a six-year term in 1995 by a unanimous vote of the BC Legislature. Under her leadership, the Advocate's Office developed the values, policies and practices necessary to implement its legislated mandate to be an independent voice for children and youth in BC.

The work of the Advocate's Office during the first quarter of 2001 focused on preparing the 2000 Annual Report, completing our pilot systemic advocacy training initiative and maintaining our individual advocacy services and community work.

In light of an expected spring provincial election, the work of an all party standing committee to appoint a new Advocate was suspended in March 2001. This meant that a new Advocate would not be appointed before Ms. Preston's retirement on May 18. Deputy Advocate Laverne MacFadden was appointed as the Acting Advocate on May 19, under Section 14 of the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act.*

Following the provincial election on May 16, a new government took office. In August, Section 14(2) of the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act* was amended to remove the clause restricting the appointment of an Acting Advocate to twenty sitting days of the Legislature. As a result, the Acting Advocate could now hold the position for up to twelve months, with a possible renewal for one additional year.

Core Services Review

The new government initiated a core services review of all of its operations, including a coordinated review of the services provided by the Children's Commission, the Child, Youth and Family Advocate, the Ombudsman, the Coroner and the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Our input into the core services review as it pertained to the Advocate's Office

focused on the value of an independent voice for children and youth; the importance of individual, community and systemic advocacy functions; and the need to support individuals and communities to be their own best advocates.

Parallel core service reviews were initiated across all ministries, including the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), which replaced the Ministry for Children and Families as the key Ministry responsible for the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* and related services. In responding to the core services review of MCFD, the Advocate's Office urged government to exempt MCFD from budget reductions and to institute a needs-based budget for child and youth services.

While government's review processes were underway throughout the late summer and fall of 2001, the Advocate's Office continued to focus on the provision of existing services, with two notable additions. These included Aboriginal advocacy services and service plan development.

In the 2001/02 operating budget, the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate received additional funds for dedicated Aboriginal advocacy services. This initiative grew out of preliminary discussions with Aboriginal child and family service agencies about the development of protocols for the delivery of advocacy services to the people they serve. Given the importance of this work, the Advocate's Office has begun the development of a blueprint for such services.

In November 2001, the Advocate's Office prepared and submitted the 2002/03 - 2004/05 Service Plan to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. This committee's mandate included the financial review of statutory officers of BC. The three-year service plan for the Advocate's Office described the mandated core functions and provided an estimate of current and future annual resource requirements.

Transition of services for children, youth and families

On February 7, the provincial cabinet announced its decision to introduce new legislation in the spring of 2002 that would eliminate the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate and the Children's Commission, and create a new Children's Officer. Key functions of the Advocate's Office were to be integrated into the functions of the new office and a transition team was established to assist the change process.

While continuing to fulfil the statutory functions of the Advocate's Office until such time as our legislation is repealed, we turned our attention to the transition process. Our goal was to promote a child-centred approach to the development and operation of the new children's office.

At the same time, significant changes were occurring in MCFD and other child-serving ministries. Questions and anxieties about the impact of these changes for children and youth were reflected in many of the calls coming into our office and became a focus of our individual advocacy services. Systemic advocacy work also focused on the changes underway in government, as reflected in our response to the provincial government service plans and budgets included in this report.

The Future

After seven years, the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate of BC is expected to come to an end in the summer of 2002. At that time, the new Office for Children and Youth will be in place, providing advocacy and monitoring functions outlined in new legislation.

This final report describes the work of the Advocate's Office over a fifteen-month period that has been unlike any other - a period in which we have worked hard to stay grounded in what matters and makes a difference for children and youth. The tabling of this report fulfils the statutory requirement to report annually on the work of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate to the Legislative Assembly, and provides us with an opportunity to look back, to look ahead and to say goodbye.

The Work of the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate

The work of the Advocate's Office is governed by the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act*, which describes the duties, powers and government services that are included in our mandate. To fulfil our legislated mandate, the Advocate's Office is organized into three core functions:

1. Individual Advocacy Services

Information and support to children, youth and families who contact the Advocate's Office about problems they have with services and support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development and other designated government services.

2. Local Advocacy Development

Training and support to communities to promote effective local and community advocacy.

3. Systemic Advocacy

Information and advice to government and the public about issues affecting children and youth.

This year, in addition to work on these functions, we invested considerable time and energy in the core review of our Office and the resulting implications for our work.

The review of the Advocate's Office was initiated in September 2001 by the provincial government, as part of its core review of all government services and functions. Under the auspices of the Attorney General and the Minister of Children and Family Development, Ms. Jane Morley, Q. C., was engaged to conduct a coordinated review of services provided to children and their families by various Ministries and Offices. Part of Ms. Morley's mandate was to identify areas of potential overlap or duplication in these services.

In keeping with an ongoing commitment to improve the effectiveness of services to children and youth, our input into this core review focused on two key issues.

First, we worked to ensure that the three core functions of the Advocate's Office were well understood and valued. We were particularly concerned that the central role of individual advocacy services was acknowledged. The delivery of individual advocacy services has enabled the Advocate's Office to support thousands of individuals to be their own best advocates and has facilitated constructive solutions to problems through informal processes. Further, direct contact with

children, youth and those who care for and about them informs and lays the foundation for systemic advocacy.

The second key concern during the core services review was to highlight the importance of an independent voice for children and youth. The Advocate's Office suggested that a statutory Officer of the Legislature was the best way to achieve the appropriate degree of independence. Based on our experience, we recommended that an independent officer, who is appointed by, reports to and has the confidence of the full Legislature, provides the best assurance that the interests of children and youth who rely on government services will be served. We pointed out that the ability to assure individuals and communities of our independence from government had been essential in building a culture and climate of trust. Finally, we emphasized that children and youth are a particularly vulnerable group whose rights require special protection.

In February 2002, cabinet made a decision to act on the recommendations of Ms. Morley's *Report on the Core Services Review of the Children's Commission and Overlapping Services Provided by the Child, Youth and Family Advocate, the Ombudsman, the Coroner and the Ministry of Children and Family Development* (the Morley Report). This report recommended the creation of a new Children's Officer, who would be appointed by an Order in Council and would report to the Legislature through the Attorney General. It also recommended the elimination of the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate and the Children's Commission. Some functions of both offices would be integrated into the new office, while other functions of the Children's Commission would be transferred to other public bodies. Legislation to support these changes would be introduced in the spring sitting of the Legislature and a transition team was established to advise the Attorney General and Minister of Children and Family Development through the change process.

Since February, the Advocate's Office has been actively involved in the transition team and related working groups to implement the recommendations from the Morley Report. Our goals during the transition process were to ensure that the new office is child and youth centred, has a mandate to serve children, youth and families, is as independent as possible and is adequately resourced. We have also been preparing for a smooth transition of our functions.

Until new legislation is proclaimed, the Advocate's Office continues to operate under existing legislation. The work of the Advocate's Office on our three core functions in 2001 and the first quarter of 2002 are described below.

Individual Advocacy Services

In 2001, the Advocate's Office continued to provide individual advocacy services to children, youth and families who contacted our Office. Individual advocacy services are at the heart of our work. They flow from the legislated mandate of the Advocate's Office to ensure that the rights and interests of children, youth and their families, as they relate to essential social services, are protected and advanced and that their views are heard and considered.

The primary goal of individual advocacy is to support children, youth, and those who care for them to be their own best advocates by providing them with information, mentoring and coaching. When a child or youth is unable to be his or her own advocate and has no natural advocate, we may become more directly involved. In these cases, our first step is to seek an informal resolution of the problem with those most directly involved. In a limited number of cases, we support children and youth through both informal and formal review processes. A child-centred approach is used to ensure that the views of children and youth are heard and respected in the decisions that are made about their lives.

Individual Advocacy Requests

The Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate is a provincial service and receives calls from across British Columbia. Since 1995, the Advocate's Office has tracked advocacy requests and client information in a database designed specifically for this Office. From its opening in 1995 to December 31, 2001, the Office has received 14,532 requests for individual advocacy services. Each advocacy request we receive involves one or more children. As the following table indicates, the number of advocacy requests in 2001 remained relatively stable.

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001
Total #	2,514	2,117	2,917	2,945
% change over previous year		-16%	+38%	+1%

In 2001, approximately 21% of calls were from children and youth, a slight increase over 2000. The remaining 79% of calls summarized in the following table came from family members, friends, foster parents, social workers, counsellors and lawyers calling about situations affecting children and youth.

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Children and Youth	14%	19%	17%	21%
Families	41%	51%	58%	55%
Service Providers	10%	8%	7%	8%
Others (e.g. friends)	3%	7%	13%	8%
Unknown	32%	15%	5%	8%

The following table indicates that most of the young people that the Advocate's Office hears from or about are under the age of 19. We also receive a small number of calls from young people who are between 19 and 24 years of age. Generally, these callers are youth who were formerly in government care and are now having difficulties accessing the supports they require in their transition to adulthood.

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Birth to 5 years	25%	22%	23%	20%
6 to 11 years	33%	32%	32%	30%
12 to 14 years	16%	15%	16%	15%
15 to 18 years	22%	28%	26%	30%
19 to 24 years	4%	3%	3%	5%

The Advocate's primary mandate is to help children, youth and families when they feel they are not receiving the services they need from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. However, as the following table indicates, many advocacy requests also involved services provided by other Ministries.

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Children and Families	75%	74%	67%	58%
Attorney General	20%	12%	19%	31%
Human Resources	10%	7%	6%	8%
Education	4%	2%	3%	3%
Other*	4%	5%	10%	11%

** Other requests include those about health, federal and provincial issues and other unspecified requests. Note: A single request for service can involve more than one Ministry. For this reason, the percentages above do not total 100.*

Children and Youth in Care

In 2001, over 950 calls were received from or about children or youth in the care of the government. The majority of these calls were about four significant barriers or concerns that callers experienced in their interactions with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

- 57% of these calls raised concerns about **planning** that is done for children and youth in care. Most of the callers indicated that plans, goals and assessments

were incomplete or that, while they had been consulted, their needs and views were not reflected. Many callers told us that they did not accept the decisions that the Ministry had made about their lives. The Advocate's Office supported these callers to advocate for planning that reflected the best interests of the child or youth and was solution focused.

- 43% of calls reflected concerns about inadequacies in the delivery of **comprehensive services**. Most of these callers told us that the services provided by or through government did not meet or were not suited to the needs or views of the child or youth. The Advocate's Office supported these callers to receive services that were integrated, co-ordinated and appropriate to their individual needs.

- 38% of calls raised concerns about **accessibility of services**. Many callers were looking for basic information about available programs and services. Other callers were unable to access services they needed for children and youth in care because of resource limitations. The Advocate's Office supported these callers to try to access the services they required.

- 32% of calls raised concerns about not being adequately **included in decision making**. These callers stated that information was not shared with them, that their views were not sought and considered or that they were not treated respectfully. The Advocate's Office supported these callers to participate in the decisions that are made about their lives.

The Advocate's Office was also involved in a small number of situations where guardianship for Aboriginal children was being transferred from MCFD to a delegated Aboriginal agency. Our role was to support a child centred approach in situations where children's stability and continuity of care needed to be balanced with the Aboriginal community's commitment to repatriate their children.

Youth Services

Callers to the Advocate's Office in 2001 raised a number of concerns about services to youth. These calls were from or about older youth who were looking for services from government. Some were youth in care, others were not, and some were former youth in care.

A number of callers were concerned about the loss of services to former permanent youth in care (SPY), also known as post-majority services. These services support young people who are leaving the permanent care of the government on their nineteenth birthday. Like most young people, former youth in care need ongoing financial and emotional support in order to make a successful transition to adulthood. The difference is that, for former youth in care, government is their only parent. Late in 2001, MCFD began to restrict access to SPY and, more recently, we understand that the Ministry has decided to eliminate the SPY program. The Advocate's Office continues to advocate for former youth in care to have access to appropriate supports.

Several calls to the Advocate's Office related to services for older youth who were not in care. These calls indicate a reduced willingness on the part of the Ministry of Children and Family Development to investigate protection concerns related to older youth or to take older youth into care. We also heard from and about older youth who were denied services by MCFD, and had difficulties accessing underage income assistance through the Ministry of Human Resources. Some young people told us that they were being discharged from temporary care without adequate preparation or planning. We were particularly concerned about a limited number of situations where there was inadequate transition planning for youth in care who required adult support services. When young people told us that they were not ready to be on their own, we supported them in achieving continued stability and support.

Family Support Services

A number of callers to our Office told us about problems obtaining family support services. These services are intended to support families to care for their own children, and include in-home and respite supports, family counselling, parenting programs, mental health services and programs for children who have witnessed family violence. Some callers required basic information, while others had difficulty accessing specific services. These calls indicate that it is often difficult for families to receive the supports and services they need to care for their own children.

Local Advocacy Development

The Advocate's Office continued to work with communities across BC to enhance and support effective local advocacy. This work is based on our legislated mandate to promote and coordinate the establishment of advocacy services for children, youth

and their families in communities. Our approach to local advocacy development reflects the belief that people are their own best advocates. By providing training and support, the Advocate's Office works to ensure that communities are knowledgeable about the issues affecting children and youth, and that workers have the skills required to incorporate advocacy into their practice with an enhanced capacity to be effective advocates for children and youth.

Regional Travel

In previous years, the Advocate and Deputy Advocates travelled extensively throughout BC, visiting an average of twenty-five to thirty communities annually for the purposes of training, learning about community and regional issues and discussing the work of the Advocate's Office.

In 2001, staff of the Advocate's Office visited the Capital Region, Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Duncan, Kamloops and Smithers as well as the Aboriginal communities surrounding Terrace and Hazelton. Some of these visits included delivery of our community advocacy workshop and our new systemic advocacy workshop, and all of the visits provided an opportunity to hear from the community and to discuss the work of the Advocate's Office.

Aboriginal Advocacy Services

One of the most significant initiatives this year was the development of dedicated Aboriginal advocacy services within the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate. The need for these services has been identified by several groups and organizations and was first raised in our 1997 Annual Report.

The Advocate's approach to the delivery of Aboriginal advocacy services has grown out of experiences and relationships with Aboriginal communities such as Carrier Sekani Family and Child Services. Through this work, there has been an increasing awareness that relationship building is key to developing protocols for community-based, culturally appropriate Aboriginal advocacy services. We have received protocol enquiries and requests from several groups, including the Metis Family Services, the North West Internation Family Services Society and Ktunaxa Kinbasket Family and Children's Services.

In May 2001, we visited the Gitxsan First Nation to explore protocols with the Gitxsan Child and Family Services Agency. We travelled to five of the six villages served by this agency and met with staff, community service providers, band administrators and others. As a result of this visit, and a follow-up meeting with staff of

the Gitxsan Child and Family Services Agency, a draft letter of understanding was developed to guide the working relationship between the Gitxsan and the Advocate's Office.

The work of the Advocate's Office with the Gitxsan highlighted the need for specific protocols with each Aboriginal community to ensure that unique cultural values, concepts and practices are explicitly identified and acknowledged within the agreements.

In 2000, the Advocate's Office initiated a budget submission for resources dedicated to advocacy services for Aboriginal children and youth. In August 2001, government approved funds and positions to resource an Aboriginal advocacy services team. An Acting Manager of Aboriginal Advocacy Services was subsequently appointed. His first priority has been the drafting of a strategic plan to support the development of community-based, culturally appropriate advocacy services. Due to pending changes in our Office, other positions on the team remained unfilled.

Concurrent with the development of dedicated Aboriginal advocacy services, our Office continued to do community outreach and liaison regarding Aboriginal advocacy and child welfare issues. This work included presentations as part of training programs for Aboriginal social workers and foster parents and networking with a number of Aboriginal organizations.

The development of our Aboriginal advocacy services team coincides with significant strategic shifts in the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The Ministry has identified the need to build capacity within Aboriginal communities to deliver a full range of services with an emphasis on early childhood and family development.

In light of these developments, the work begun by the Advocate's Office on Aboriginal advocacy services will be even more important in the days to come.

Community Advocacy Training

Our Office continued to deliver the community advocacy workshop to groups and communities around BC. This workshop is designed to help service providers understand and integrate effective individual advocacy into their ongoing practice and to develop approaches and skills that help children, youth and families to be their own best advocates.

We delivered the community advocacy workshop at an Aboriginal child and youth conference in Duncan, for staff of the Children's Foundation, for foster parents and for college students in child and youth care programs. The Kamloops Advocacy Council also delivered this workshop in the Thompson/Cariboo region.

Systemic Advocacy Training

In the fall of 2000, in response to requests from communities for training in effective systemic advocacy, the Advocate's Office began a systemic advocacy training initiative. The first phase of the initiative was a six-month, facilitated process with twelve groups and organizations, each of whom wanted to develop and implement a systemic advocacy campaign on an issue affecting children and youth.

Over eight sessions, this initiative focused on a range of topics related to advocacy, including the ethics of advocacy, media training, and building coalitions. The initiative was an interactive learning experience during which the Advocate's Office developed materials and approaches to support effective systemic advocacy in the community while the participating groups increased their advocacy capacity. This work was completed in the spring of 2001. Systemic advocacy workshops have now been developed and delivered in Victoria, Kamloops and Vancouver, with very positive participant feedback.

Support for Community Advocacy

Over the past seven years, the Advocate's Office has supported community advocacy through direct participation and, in some cases, financial contributions. For example, in 2001 the Advocate's Office contributed a total of $28,000 to the work of:

- **First Call, BC's Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition** - Staff from the Advocate's Office participate in First Call's coordinating committee, provincial coalition and early years roundtable. This year, the Advocate's Office contributed funds to support First Call's work on transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood.

- **Kamloops Community Advocacy Council** - One staff member of the Advocate's Office serves on this Council and our Office contributes financially to facilitate some of the Council's activities. This year, the Council continued to provide individual and systemic advocacy training, planning and advocacy on issues of child and youth mental health, early childhood development and care, and youth services.

- **Society for Children and Youth** - The Advocate's Office contributed funds to this society to support an analysis of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* and the *Secure Care Act*, assessing their compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- **FAS/E Support Network of BC** - The Advocate's Office made a financial contribution to the work of this network, which provides information, support and education on fetal alcohol syndrome and other disabilities caused by alcohol use during pregnancy.

Support for Youth Advocacy

The Advocate's Office has continued to form partnerships that focus on youth advocacy, including participation with the **Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks** (the Federation). A staff member from our Office served as an adult planning advisor and participated in the Federation's steering committee meetings and Capital Region YouthSpeak. The Advocate's Office also funded a Youth Advocate who worked on joint projects relevant to the goals of youth in care and the Advocate's Office.

A new initiative this year has been our co-sponsorship of **The Right Way Project**, which focuses on youth rights education and advocacy. This project was developed by Save the Children Canada and is offered in six sites across Canada. The BC project is jointly sponsored by Save the Children Canada, Human Resources Development Canada and the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate. The project focuses primarily on youth at risk or in care, and trains youth facilitators to deliver workshops on rights and advocacy. Approximately 60 workshops involving up to 600 youth will be offered in BC. The project coordinator works out of, and receives support from, the Advocate's Office.

Systemic Advocacy

Systemic advocacy work is based on the legislated mandate of the Advocate's Office to provide information and advice to government and communities about the availability, effectiveness, responsiveness and relevance of designated services to children, youth and their families. We identify problems within the child and youth serving system, and try to affect changes in public attitudes, legislation, and policy.

In previous years, the Advocate's annual report has included recommendations on priority systemic issues. This year, the systemic advocacy work of the Advocate's Office has included commentary on significant changes in the delivery of services to children and youth that were initiated by the provincial government.

Advising Government and the Public

On March 13, 2001, the Advocate's 2000 Annual Report was released. It included a six-point plan to improve services for children and youth. The six key components were:

- Stable leadership in the Ministry for Children and Families
- A needs-based budgeting approach to services for children and youth
- A move to community-based service delivery of services for children and youth
- A stable and experienced workforce within the Ministry for Children and Families
- The creation of a designated early development fund
- Support for comprehensive Aboriginal services

During the spring and early summer of 2001, the Advocate's Office addressed this plan through public education, including media appearances and speaking engagements. In July 2001, the Advocate's Office met with the newly appointed Minister of Children and Family Development, the Minister of State for Early Childhood Development, and the Deputy Minister of Children and Family Development to review the six-point plan.

In the summer of 2001, the provincial government initiated core services and budget review processes across government. As part of these processes, MCFD requested community input on a series of proposed strategic shifts in the delivery of services to children, youth and families. In addition, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services held pre-budget consultations across the province. The Advocate's Office participated in both of these processes, promoting the needs of children and youth.

Building on the six-point plan, we urged government to exempt MCFD from budget reductions and to implement a needs-based budgeting process that would provide adequate resources to meet the essential social service needs of children, youth and their families. In response to MCFD's core services review process, we emphasized that the Ministry's plan to promote family and community capacity to better protect children would require additional, not fewer, resources.

Throughout the fall, the Office heard concerns about pending changes to services for children and youth. In response to growing worry in the community, the Advocate's Office wrote an open letter to children and youth in care in BC, reminding them of their rights. This

letter highlighted their right to be treated well, to get the services they need and to have their voices heard in significant decisions made about their lives. In addition, the Advocate's Office hosted a meeting with provincial stakeholders to share information and discuss perspectives on these concerns.

Early in 2002, the results of government's budget and core services reviews were made public, indicating significant reductions in MCFD's budget and staffing levels over a three-year period. Due to our serious concern about the impact of these and other reductions across government, an analysis of how the provincial government's service plans and budgets affect children, youth and families is included in this report.

Priority Systemic Issues

The Advocate's Office participates in and facilitates discussions amongst stakeholders on a wide range of systemic issues affecting children and youth. This year, for example, we participated in the Children's Commission's child fatality multi-disciplinary team and in consultations on the child and youth mental health plan and secure care.

The Advocate's Office also identifies key systemic issues that require attention. Over the last fifteen months, we have provided government with advice on three specific systemic issues facing children and youth.

1. Restructuring of Services for Children, Youth and Families

An important systemic issue addressed by the Advocate's Office this year was the new provincial government's plan for restructuring services for children, youth and families. In early June 2001, the Premier appointed his Cabinet and outlined the responsibilities of each minister and minister of state. Our initial review of the proposed restructuring indicated that seven ministers would now be responsible for the essential social services that had been primarily provided by the Ministry for Children and Families in the past.

Based on long-standing concerns shared with other groups about the need for integrated and co-ordinated services, the Advocate's Office wrote to the Premier with questions that a young person in need of services might have about the new system. As well, the following recommendations made by the Advocate's Office were reaffirmed:

- One Ministry should be responsible for first contact with children, youth and families seeking services and for ensuring that all services to children and youth were integrated

- Accountability should be enhanced by ensuring that services for children and youth are accessible, easily understood and have appeal mechanisms available to those who are denied services
- Front line services should be protected during another period of restructuring

Since this time, the government has reconsidered its initial plans and reintegrated most of the services for children and youth into the new Ministry of Children and Family Development.

2. Services to Former Permanent Youth In Care (SPY)

Over the last year, the Advocate's Office has received calls from youth throughout the province who have grown up in the care of the government and need assistance beyond their nineteenth birthday, when they are required to leave care regardless of their personal circumstances. A significant number of older youth are not able to return to their families and have government as their only parent and support. Many young people have told our Office that they are concerned about the lack of support provided during their transition from government care into adulthood, and have asked for our help in accessing the Ministry's Services to Former Permanent Youth In Care Program (SPY).

These concerns coincided with MCFD decisions to freeze funding for the SPY program part way through the year. We understand that the program has now been cancelled. The Advocate's Office believes that young people deserve and require ongoing support to become productive and self-sufficient members of society. In October 2001, we joined the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks in asking the Minister of Children and Family Development to reinstate funding for the SPY program on an equitable and consistent province-wide basis.

3. Early Childhood Development

In the fall of 2001, the Minister of State for Women's Equality conducted a provincial survey regarding the future direction of child care services in BC. The response from the Advocate's Office highlighted the value of quality, affordable child care, as well as the documented economic and societal benefits found when children have access to quality early childhood experiences. We stressed that all children, despite the current fiscal situation, should have the opportunity to benefit from this care.

In anticipation of pending announcements about the provincial government's early years strategy and early years fund, the Advocate's Office urged the Minister of State for Early Childhood Development to ensure that comprehensive services, including early childhood development programs, would be fully funded, regardless of the approach used to secure needed funding.

Summary

The problems with services for children, youth and their families that we heard and learned about through our individual advocacy services, our local advocacy development and our systemic advocacy in 2001 are not new to us. In fact, we have reported on similar issues in previous annual reports and over the years have made recommendations about ways in which government can make improvements to services.

Given the number of important changes underway in MCFD, the issues and trends that we heard about in 2001 take on additional significance, particularly as they impact the Ministry's plans to reduce the number of children and youth in care. If the Ministry's plans are to be successful, then it is essential that: the needs of former youth in care are met; support is given to older youth who aren't ready to manage on their own; and adequate resources are provided so that families and communities have the supports they require to care for their children.

Provincial Government Service Plans and Budgets

How They Affect the Children, Youth and Families of BC

Introduction

Since October 2001, the provincial government has announced a number of significant decisions about the direction that it is taking over the next three fiscal years. While many details are still unknown, the three year service plans released by MCFD (http://www.gov.bc.ca/mcf/) and other ministries, the provincial budget tabled on February 19, 2002, and other recent announcements provide a much clearer picture of the future direction of services to children, youth and families in BC. Based on the information now available, we remain very concerned about the delivery of services to children, youth and families.

MCFD Budget Reductions

The Advocate's Office believes that the proposed budget reductions will negatively impact children, youth and their families. We continue to urge the government to exempt MCFD from budget reductions and to implement a needs-based budget, including a commitment from the Legislature to provide adequate funding to meet the essential services needs of children and youth.

Over the next three years, more than $360 million will be cut from MCFD's operating budget. This represents a 23% reduction in resources.

MCFD's three-year service plan provides a clearer picture of how the Ministry intends to achieve these reductions. Close to $236 million of these reductions will come from the three primary service areas that directly affect children, youth and families. These cuts include:

- $185. 7 million from child protection and family development
- $34. 5 million from youth justice, child and youth mental health and youth services
- $15. 6 million from early childhood development and special needs services for children and youth

In addition to these reductions, almost $29 million will be cut from the division responsible for province-wide standards, public accountability and performance management mechanisms for new governance structures.

As part of its budget process, the Ministry is reviewing 15,000 contracts with community based non-profit and for-profit service providers. MCFD contracts with these

agencies for the delivery of most of the direct services provided to children, youth, and families as well as adults with special needs. Over the coming months, the Ministry plans to phase out contracts that are not in line with the Ministry's strategic shifts or do not provide direct service delivery to clients. It is expected that a number of programs and services will be affected.

Since the creation of the Advocate's Office, in May of 1995, calls from or about over 14,000 children and youth indicate to us that existing resources do not adequately meet the essential service needs of children and youth across the province. Addressing the need for services such as alcohol, drug and mental health treatment will take additional resources, not fewer. Therefore, the Advocate's Office does not support any reduction in resources for children and youth, and has recommended a needs-based budget process that would:

1. Assess the need for essential social services and programs for children and youth at community, regional and provincial levels. Alcohol and drug services, mental health services, family supports and services for children and youth with special needs are examples of essential social services.

2. Estimate the cost of providing these services and programs based on assessed needs.

3. Compare the estimated costs of services, based on assessed needs, with existing budgets for these services.

4. Identify the gap, if any, between the estimated cost and existing budgets.

5. Develop a plan to fund the gap.

6. Review and revise the needs-based budget at regular intervals to reflect substantive changes in needs, measurement outcomes, service delivery efficiencies, etc.

While in Opposition, the Premier supported the recommendation in our 2000 Annual Report for a needs-based budgeting approach. However, we see no evidence that the pending cuts to MCFD's budget are based on an assessment of the actual needs of children, youth and families. In the absence of such evidence, we conclude that a 23% reduction to MCFD's budget is an arbitrary fiscal target.

We are concerned that budget reductions in MCFD will make things more difficult for children, youth and families and could seriously compromise the Ministry's ability to effectively implement its strategic shifts.

MCFD Staffing Reductions

The Advocate's Office does not support staffing reductions in MCFD.

Over the next three years, staffing levels in MCFD will be reduced by 22% - from 5,076 full time equivalent (FTE) positions in 2001/02 to 3,963 in 2004/05. Of the remaining 3,963 FTEs, 2,800 will be transferred to regional authorities under new community governance structures that are being developed and 1,163 FTEs will remain in the direct employ of the Ministry.

For some time, the Advocate's Office has been concerned about the staffing crisis in the Ministry and has highlighted the need for a stable and experienced workforce. In our 2000 Annual Report, we concluded that this ongoing crisis has had a "profound impact on whether children, youth and their families receive the social services they require."

A number of details about how and where staffing reductions will occur are not yet known. We do know that eleven proposed child and youth mental health positions will not be filled, in spite of significant unmet needs in this area. Regardless of how MCFD meets its staffing reductions target, at the end of three years there will be over 1,100 fewer staff available to deliver services.

The *Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act*, passed on January 29, 2002, is expected to have a significant impact on many non-profit and private agencies in the community social services sector. We are concerned that this may lead to instability and tension in the contracted sector, which could affect the delivery of essential social services to children and youth.

Reducing the Number of Children and Youth in Care

The Advocate's Office agrees with increased support for families in their role as primary caregivers for their children, and urges the government to direct additional resources and energy to reducing the need to bring children and youth into care.

MCFD's service plan outlines a strategic shift to reduce the number of children and youth in care by promoting and supporting the capacity and responsibility of families and communities to protect and care for their children. The Ministry intends to introduce new measures to reduce the number of children in care in BC from the current 11 per 1,000 children under nineteen years of age to 9 per 1,000. The Ministry also plans to reduce the average cost per child in care through increased use of foster homes and extended family placements rather than more costly contracted residential facilities.

Further, MCFD's service plan includes plans to "refocus tools and supports to increase the role of the family in addressing identified risks to a child in ways that keep children within their immediate and extended families." Funding will be directed to those family development programs that "show evidence that they increase a family's capacity to care for its children."

Ideally, a reduced child and youth in care caseload would be the outcome of enhanced family development services and supports. However, accomplishing this goal will take additional resources, not fewer. Communities throughout the province tell us they do not have the resources necessary to provide comprehensive family supports. Planned reductions in MCFD's primary service areas that support children, youth and families will decrease their capacity even further. Moreover, front-line practice that is driven by a goal to reduce the average cost per child in care calls into question the Ministry's stated objective to improve the safety and well being of children and youth receiving child protection services. Given these realities, we are gravely concerned about how the Ministry's plan to reduce the number of children and youth in care will be achieved while still keeping children safe.

If MCFD's goal is to reduce the number of children or youth in care, this can be done through changes to legislation, policy and practice. A simple reduction in the numbers, however, does not necessarily mean that children and youth are better protected or well served.

Income Assistance to Families

We strongly urge the government to rethink the impact of changes to income assistance for children, youth and families.

Supporting families to care for and protect their children is not solely the responsibility of MCFD; it is a shared responsibility across government and in communities. For this reason, we note with serious concern the impact of proposed changes in other Ministries - particularly the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR) - on children, youth and families.

As a result of changes made by MHR, supports available to vulnerable families are being reduced. Income assistance rates for single parents are lower and single parents with children are now required to seek employment once their youngest child turns three (down from the current age of seven). At the same time, it is more difficult to qualify for a child care subsidy because of budget reductions to this program.

Changes in MHR will also impact older youth and their families. As of July 2002, young adults, 19 years and over, will have to live independently for two years before they are eligible for income assistance. While we understand that young adults who are in the care of the government until their nineteenth birthday will be exempt from this eligibility criteria, we are concerned about the impact on other youth. Furthermore, the availability of youth employment, apprenticeship, and college programs is in question.

These and other proposed changes demonstrate reduced, not enhanced, support for children, youth and families. The MCFD service plan confirms that, according to Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Off (LICO), 15% of BC's children and youth live in poverty. Research has clearly established the relationship between poverty and increased risk factors. Further, the Ministry reports that 65% of children who are taken into care come from single parents on income assistance - a pattern that has remained unchanged for the last decade. The program reductions now proposed by MHR put the most vulnerable children, youth and families at even greater risk and stand in direct contradiction with MCFD's intention to increase capacity of families to care for their children.

Services to Older Youth

The Advocate's Office agrees that services to older youth need to reflect and respect their growing maturity and reminds government that these young people require ongoing supports in order to make a successful transition into adulthood.

The Ministry has announced that it will no longer provide post-majority services for young adults, who were formerly in the care of the government, once they reach their nineteenth birthday. As we have highlighted elsewhere in this report, young adults who are leaving the care of the government need the same kind of ongoing support that many young people get from their families. The Ministry has made an important commitment of $2 million for bursaries for former youth in care to pursue their educational goals. However, this is a time-limited program that cannot provide the comprehensive supports that many of these youth need to make a successful transition to adulthood and independence.

We are concerned about an overall reduction in services to older adolescents. The Ministry indicates that it will "continue to use youth agreements, and refocus other programs and services such as youth outreach, to better target and meet the needs of at-risk youth". Given a $34. 5 million reduction in youth justice, child and youth mental health and youth services, we are concerned that programs and services will be reduced, not refocused.

Youth agreements, which provide a young person with living expenses to support their return to school or work experience, could be effective for some youth. However, the restrictive eligibility criteria and inconsistent application of youth agreements across the province make this a very limited resource. Effective youth agreements require a strong network of community-based supports and services, but these are the very services that may be reduced. There are currently 161 youth agreements in place, with a projected increase to 200 youth agreements next year. These numbers do not assure us that there is a plan to meet the needs of high risk youth.

Early Childhood Development and Special Needs Children and Youth

The Advocate's Office urges the government to work with communities to develop a comprehensive early years strategy, including quality, affordable child care, supplemented by targeted interventions for those with identified needs.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Special Needs Children and Youth together comprise one of MCFD's primary service areas. The overall goal for this service area is to improve family capacity and readiness to learn for children under six years of age, including those with special needs.

With regard to special needs services, MCFD has a specific objective to "target evidence-based, individualized services to those children with special needs and their families who most require them". They also plan to "target family development programs to those clients in greatest need by establishing restricted eligibility criteria and a new rate structure."

In past annual reports, the Advocate has highlighted the need for improved access to services for children with special needs, including those with invisible disabilities. Given projected budget reductions in this service area, we are concerned about the Ministry's ability to meet both existing and emerging needs. The Ministry must ensure that children with special needs have equitable access to a comprehensive range of appropriate services.

Regarding early childhood development services, the Minister of State for Early Childhood Development (ECD) has announced intentions to examine opportunities for greater local delivery of children's services; provide greater support to early childhood development programs; examine opportunities for parental education initiatives; and create a Legacy Fund for early childhood development enhancements. Some of the services that government is supporting include infant development programs, family resource centres, Aboriginal early childhood services and supported child care.

Funds for some of these expenditures come from federal funds that BC is receiving as a result of the federal/provincial/territorial Agreement on Early Childhood Development, signed in September 2000. Over 5 years, BC will receive $291 million from the federal government for new or expanded ECD initiatives. The provincial government has also contributed $5 million to its Legacy Fund and is challenging the corporate and community sectors to raise an additional $20 million by 2005.

While the ECD initiatives announced to date will support some very valuable services, they do not constitute a plan for comprehensive early development services that ensure all babies and young children in BC have their needs met in the early years. As highlighted in our 2000 Annual Report, early development services must be available during the first five years of every child's life in order to promote healthy growth and development. It is important to distinguish these from early intervention services, which are designed to address problems as soon as they are identified.

The Advocate's Office believes that child care is an essential element of a comprehensive early years strategy. In BC, 76% of couples with children have both parents in the workforce, while 66% of BC's single parents are in the work force. If there is to be a major impact on the positive development of the majority of children in BC, it is important to ensure access to quality, affordable child care. However, fewer than 10% of BC's children under the age of twelve have access to a licensed child care space and the cost of care puts quality child care out of reach for many families.

Reductions to the child care subsidy program and a planned elimination of funding for the child care infrastructure in communities will make it even more difficult for parents to access quality child care. These cross-ministerial impacts have the potential to undermine MCFD's intentions to strengthen community capacity.

A clear commitment from the provincial government is required to ensure that adequate resources are available for its early years strategy. In order to adequately resource comprehensive ECD services, we believe that government will need to channel resources that include the current MCFD and cross government spending on the early years, the federal contribution under the Agreement on Early Childhood and endowments from a substantial public/private partnership. Regardless of the approach used by government to secure needed funding, they maintain responsibility for ensuring that a comprehensive continuum of early childhood services is fully funded.

Community Governance

Community governance requires the development and empowerment of inclusive structures that ensure a full range of voices are heard and respected, particularly those of children, youth and families. This requires community capacity building, a transparent process and adequate resources.

Over the coming years, MCFD intends to establish new governance systems for the community living sector and for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child protection and family development services.

In the past, the Advocate's Office has recommended that services to children and youth be delivered through community based boards because we believe that communities know how best to deliver services that meet their needs. However, the delivery of services for children and youth at the community level can only work if there are adequate financial and human resources in place. In the face of significant budget reductions, uncertainty around staffing, and increased stress for low-income families and older adolescents, it is not clear how communities will be able to provide better services.

Last fall, in our submission to MCFD's core services review, the Advocate's Office urged government to ensure that adequate legislation, policy and financial resources were in place as a precondition to the devolution of services to communities. The following key elements of a provincial framework were outlined:

- Equitable access to and portability of integrated services
- Adequate resources with mechanisms in place to address existing inequities in community capacity
- Comprehensive services for Aboriginal children and families
- Practice standards that promote high quality services and the best possible outcomes for children
- A stable and experienced workforce with the skills and abilities to do their jobs, whether inside or outside government
- Accountability mechanisms

While MCFD indicates that they will maintain responsibility for provincial standards and accountability systems, the Advocate's office is not able to assess whether the preconditions for devolution to community governance that we recommended have been addressed.

MCFD is moving to establish five child and family development regions aligned with the new health authority boundaries. While there are definite benefits to shared service delivery boundaries, we have concerns and questions about planning to date.

First, the five proposed regions are very large and include within their boundaries a number of diverse and unique communities. In our 2000 Annual Report, we identified existing difficulties with the size and scope of MCFD's northern region and recommended that the Ministry consider dividing this region into three. We are concerned that without adequate attention to diversity within the new regions, similar challenges will develop.

Secondly, there is little or no information available to date on the models that will be adopted for children and family development community governance. We do know that MCFD is in the process of devolving powers, duties and functions of the Director under the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* to its existing regional structure. While there may be a number of valid reasons for decentralizing these functions, changes in the management structure of MCFD are very different from the introduction of a community governance model.

Aboriginal Services

The Advocate's Office urges the Ministry to work closely with Aboriginal peoples, to ensure a respectful and adequately resourced process for building Aboriginal services. While this transition is underway, it is essential that the rights of Aboriginal children and youth are respected and their current needs are met.

MCFD has identified "building capacity within Aboriginal communities to deliver a full range of services with an emphasis on early childhood and family development" as a strategic priority. The development by Aboriginal peoples of comprehensive services for Aboriginal children, youth and families is essential work that must be done. We all share in the legacy of historical injustices of child protection policies and practices for Aboriginal people. As highlighted in our 2000 Annual Report, services for Aboriginal children, youth and families must be developed within appropriate cultural contexts, and capacity must be built within each Aboriginal community to take on the

necessary work. Aboriginal people must be able to determine their financial and human resource needs and appropriate time lines for undertaking responsibility for all aspects of this critical developmental work.

Transition Planning

The Advocate's Office calls on the provincial government to develop a transition plan that ensures stability of services to children, youth and families during the change process.

The changes proposed in MCFD are profound and significant. They come after years of constant reorganization and restructuring within the Ministry. In past annual reports, our Office has stated that major restructuring within the Ministry creates chaos and distraction and detracts from the primary job of ensuring quality services for children and youth.

The Ministry has budgeted for some costs of transition to community governance over the next two years. Calls to our Office have indicated that young people and families are anxious about possible changes in services. The Ministry must give careful attention to implementing their strategic shifts in ways that maintain the safety and well-being of vulnerable children and youth throughout the process.

Conclusion

Changes in the delivery of services to children, youth and families must be based on their needs and must, at the end of the day, make things better for them.

Given existing inadequacies in current services for children, youth and families, the Advocate's Office fears that budget reductions in primary service areas to children, youth and families, uncertainty and instability in the workforce and increased stresses on low income families can only make things worse.

As government pursues their proposed changes, we ask them to remember that children and youth in BC have basic human and legislated rights that must be protected - the right to protection, to the provision of adequate supports and services, and to participate in decisions that are made about their lives. These rights are owned, not earned. Children and youth do not have to meet or achieve certain standards, measures or outcomes in order to exercise their rights. Rather, children and youth have an inherent right to the best quality of life that we can provide for them right now.

Saying Goodbye

The work of the Advocate's Office has always been firmly rooted in our vision and values. Most importantly, we have strived to make our work **child and youth centred**. We believe that decisions made about children and youth should be based on their views, voice and needs. The priority of the Advocate's Office has been to support the capacity of children and youth to participate in decision-making processes that are about them. While they may not always get what they want, we believe that they have a right to be heard by those who should be listening.

The Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate has also been **committed to building capacity** - of individuals, communities and systems. We believe that people are their own best advocates and that our job is to support them to have their voices heard. We have focused our limited resources on assisting those who are most marginalized and have the least access to information, support and power.

The Advocate's Office knows that **effective advocacy is about finding solutions,** not about finding blame. When everyone shares responsibility for creating and nurturing respectful advocacy, children and youth are better off.

Now, after seven years of being an independent voice for children and youth, we are saying goodbye. Although government's decision to eliminate our Office has been difficult for us, we are committed to putting the needs of the children and youth of BC at the centre of the transition work that lies ahead.

Responsibility for being the voice for children and youth in BC will rest with the new Office for Children and Youth. We wish the new office well as it takes on its mandate. If we can offer any advice, based on our experience, it would be to stay grounded in what really makes a difference for children, youth, families and communities across BC. They know their needs best, and supporting their ability to be heard is one of the most important things you can do.

Our experience has also taught us that the well being of children and youth is not the sole responsibility of one person, one office or one Ministry of government. It is a responsibility that all British Columbians share.

Government has a particular responsibility to carefully consider the impact that all of its decisions may have on children, youth and families. Furthermore, government has a fundamental responsibility to ensure that the resources required to protect and nurture our children and youth are secure. But government cannot do it alone. Individuals and communities also have a vital role to play. We have had the privilege to work with family members, service providers, volunteers and organizations from across the province who are passionate advocates for children and youth. We have been struck by the outpouring of concern and compassion for children and youth in need. The challenge now is to extend our efforts to find solutions for individual children, youth and families into a broader commitment to make things better for all children and youth. We must strive to ensure that every child and youth in BC receives the best care and attention possible.

Finally, we want to thank the children and youth of BC - especially those of you who are in the care of the government or who rely on government services - for teaching us so much. From you, we have learned what really matters. You taught us that when you are respected and nurtured, you can and will thrive. You showed us that you have endless energy and a wonderful capacity to say what needs to be said in the way that you want to say it. We hope you will keep sharing your experiences with the new Office for Children and Youth. Remember that you have the right to be heard.